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Submitted photos

FAMILY: Emily Harlan and Robin Mellady pose with their five children. The Russiaville couple has been together nearly four years.



HAPPY: Corine O'Neill and Laura Vaughn have been together for seven years.



COUPLE: Chaka Gray, left, and Darick Schave, right, have been together for four years and live in Kokomo.

Stuck in the middle

Long-term Howard Co. LGBT couples discuss their experiences

By Rob Burgess

Tribune night editor

[**Editor's note:** This is the first in a two-part series exploring the state's ban of same-sex marriage. The second part will explore the fight over HJR3 at the Statehouse level and will be published next week.]

As a couple who has been together for nearly four years, Emily Harlan and Robin Mellady have five children between them. Their children range in age from 2 months to 16 years old. Of course, that means they don't have time for much else.

"We are constantly going to a softball game, which her daughter plays pretty much year-round," said Harlan, a hospital manager for an animal clinic. "I have two boys in football. So, from August to November that's what we're doing. ... I have three from a previous relationship. She has one. We just had our first and last one together. The minivan is full."

This doesn't make them much different from many other couples living in Russiaville, where they reside. What does separate them is their legal status. They aren't married, and legally can't be according to Indiana's Defense of Marriage Act, which went into effect in 2004. Compounded on top of that is HJR3, the proposed constitutional amendment which would

come before voters in November if approved by the Indiana General Assembly. On Tuesday, the resolution was moved from the House Judiciary Committee, which heard hours of testimony last week before recessing without a vote. The measure was approved Wednesday night as the House Elections and Apportionment Committee voted 9-3 in favor of the ban, sending it to the full House of Representatives.

“All my straight friends are like, ‘why don’t you go to Illinois and get married?’ Well, why? Because, right when I get home it’s not legal,” said Harlan referring to Illinois’ recent signing of same-sex marriage legalization into law.

Harlan said even if she and her partner wanted to move to a state more accepting of their relationship, they couldn’t. They have more than just themselves to think about.

“We’ve got kids that are tied to Indiana and Indianapolis,” she said. “We can’t go live in another state because of our respective exes. ... We have a fifty-mile [radius]. That’s a problem.”

Other same-sex couples in Howard County with less strings tying to them to a particular location said in a series of phone interviews this week they have thought about packing their bags.

“This is a very conservative state,” said Darick Schave, a graphic designer who lives in Kokomo with his boyfriend of four years, Chaka Gray, a

personal assistant. "I feel like a black guy living in 1962 in the Deep South. ... I don't plan on being in Indiana the rest of my life. I've been here since I was born and there's so much more out there for me to see. Honestly, if Indiana doesn't progress, then I will move. Definitely."

That sentiment was echoed by Corine O'Neill, who works at Kmart and lives with her partner of seven years, Laura Vaughn, who works at Pizza Hut.

"We've definitely considered moving either out to the east coast or maybe the west coast," said O'Neill. "It's more open. People don't seem to care as much about it."

OUT AND ABOUT

Harlan was quick to point out her ambivalence about her legal status had nothing to do with her daily interactions with neighbors.

"I came from Indianapolis where, obviously, it was very accepted," she said. "I've been out for about ten, eleven years now. I didn't have any problems. I was worried about coming to Russiaville just because it's a very, very small town. I can tell you I have not had one ounce of problem. I've never had anyone look at us different, whisper. I've never felt uncomfortable in my own skin living in Russiaville. Ever."

Harlan said she could only recall one incident where any member of her family felt uncomfortable.

“Football coaches, they all know,” she said. “They’ve taken our kids under their wings. My kids are all very, very strong. They’ve known for a long time. They don’t get picked on. My daughter will wear an ‘I love my lesbian mom’ shirt to school. ... One teacher said that shirt is offensive. ... That is probably the only time I felt like, ‘oh, that hurt.’”

AT WORK

O’Neill said conflict hasn’t come into play for her in either her or her partner’s place of employment.

“When I first got hired at Kmart I was really nervous that people would be kind of weird about it at least if not hateful, but I’ve been really lucky,” said O’Neill. “Our coworkers at the job she’s had and here at Kmart. At school you kind of expect that from kids, but at work our jobs have been really cool about it.”

Harlan said her company was based out of California and she was able to be on her partner’s insurance. She said during her 18 years with her company she had never experienced any kind of pushback in the workplace due to her relationship.

“When I interviewed for a manager position in a different location, I just told them right from the very beginning: This is who I am and you’re just going to have to understand and accept me and if you’re not, then I’m not a

good fit for this place,” said Harlan. “All of the other employees have been supportive.”

MORE THAN A WEDDING

While the ceremony itself gets the most attention, the couples said they all agreed marriage was most important when life’s difficulties presented themselves.

“That’s a really big thing to get people to try to understand,” said O’Neill. “I don’t even want a big, extravagant ceremony. ... One of the most important things is being not in control but being on that level where you have a say in what happens in your life and your partner’s life. I read a lot of cases where people are denied medical benefits or are denied the right to see their partner [in the hospital].”

Harlan said her recent experience giving birth made her reflect on what would have happened if her health took a turn for the worse.

“If something were to have happened to me in the hospital she wouldn’t have been able to make life decisions for me,” said Harlan of her partner. “I think those are the things that people take for granted every day that we don’t have. ... A lot of people say it’s just a piece of paper, but to us it would feel like freedom.”

Schave said he wouldn't say no to a decked out wedding, but cared more about what came years later.

"Yeah, I want to have a beautiful wedding with him, that's awesome, but it's the after effects of that which count," said Schave. "It's a lifelong commitment and there's so much we would benefit from."

However, Harlan said as long as the state didn't legally recognize her commitment, she might as well take advantage where she could.

"The way the state looks at me, I'm a single mother of four and when my kids go to apply to college, that'll look really good," said Harlan, laughing.

"That is the only positive. If I have to find my positive, I'm going to find my positive. If they need me to play the single-mom-of-four-card, I will. ...

They're only hurting themselves ultimately, because how many people in this state, in this community, are living like me?"

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